

# THE CHALLENGE OF INNOVATION LEADERSHIP

Richard Citrin and Michael Couch

## A CHALLENGING PARADOX ARISES WHEN LEADERS MUST CHAMPION OR LEAD

teams charged with innovation: most project champions and leaders can describe what innovation should look like, but struggle to guide innovative project teams.

The competency of innovation leadership, a hallmark of top-performing leaders, is not a common skill of leaders worldwide. In fact, most find it difficult to learn the behaviors needed to guide innovation. It typically is a skill that must be experienced, recognized, rewarded and developed early in a leader's career. Organizations can sometimes compensate for this skill gap by studying what works and building innovation processes.

Fortunately, recent research shows that leaders who do some basic things can create the climate in which innovation teams can be fast-to-fail, fast-to-learn and fast-to-market. It's important to note that innovation leadership is not about being personally creative. It's all about facilitating the creative process of others and helping bring their creative ideas to market. Here are some of the key leadership capabilities that drive innovation.

**Building Team Effectiveness.** The range of capabilities on a team relates directly to speed-to-market. An innovation leader pays attention to the mix of talent, selects a diverse team with a wide range of experiences and background and fights to keep the team together until the project is complete. Team cohesiveness comes from spending time working together and communicating with a diverse set of talented people. Effective teams don't occur by chance: they must be intentionally created and nurtured.

**Guiding Team Purpose.** Nothing glues a team together better than a shared purpose and clear goals. Having challenging, non-ambiguous goals for innovation teams drives speed-to-market and produces effective outcomes. Innovation leaders need to craft simple and compelling visions of the team's work and its impact. Leaders focus on the future. They consider the multiple stakeholders involved in innovation work and craft approaches to engage them. Innovation teams should have an explicit charter that's regularly reviewed and updated. If a team is struggling, getting them back on track often involves reviewing and re-confirming the purpose, non-purpose, objectives and business case for the project.

**Building Team Connections.** How an innovation team handles information exchange outside of the team is directly related to efficiency, effectiveness and speed. Innovation leaders ensure that each team member has direct, frequent, two-way connections to key stakeholders—especially customers. A common cause of innovation failure stems from the lack of the “voice of the customer” or the “voice of the market.” Innovation most often comes from identifying unique combinations of existing successful ideas. The best way to uncover

those combinations is not by sitting in team meetings and ideating. It comes from encouraging connections inside and outside the business, helps create new insights. Smashups and casual collisions drive innovation.

**Get Out of the Way.** Empowering leaders explain the “what” and “why” of an innovation challenge and then get out of the way. They trust that the team will determine the “how.” They involve the team in setting innovation goals and objectives, then allow them to take responsibility for their own work. Micro-management kills innovation. If you want to be on the team, then you shouldn't be the project champion.

**Leadership Trust and Integrity.** Effective innovation leaders serve as advocates for the teams and remain consistent in their communications and actions. They take responsibility when things go wrong and admit mistakes. And they address team conflicts quickly and effectively.

Innovation Leadership can be a daunting challenge. Approaching the challenge with the perspective of these key leadership capabilities can make the task more straightforward.

